

Swimming with a Naiad by 000Unknown000

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Summary:

“Mike’s eyes sought out El. Sometimes he needed to see her in front of him, or hear her voice through the supercom, just to remind himself she was real, not just a ghost he’s been chasing within the cotton walls of the fort. Whenever he could reach out to her, it would feel like he was given a second chance.”

A day of summer fun goes somewhere unexpected.

Swimming with a Naiad

Author's Note:

I'm ashamed at how much time I spent on this.

Oh well, please enjoy!

“Da na na na na
da na na na
da na na na na na”

Is there something strange
In your neighborhood?”

“Who you gonna call?”

“Ghostbusters!”

“WOULD YOU SHIT HEADS SHUT THE HELL UP!”

Her shout echoed around the woods, leaving everyone in a silence, soon broken by a chorus of laughter.

Max stared at the clouds lazily moving across the sky above their heads while their bike wheels traveled across the rocky dirt roads.

“Why do I even hang out with you guys?” She asked, loud enough for everyone to hear, adding an eye roll.

Lucas answered while everyone else struggled to cease giggling. “Awe, c’m Max, you know you love us.”

“Who said I ever did?” She retorted, thrusting a fist to the back of his shoulder. Everyone wordlessly thought she would of done more if not for the fact he’s the one responsible for preventing them from crashing headfirst into a pit of thorns and poison ivy and god knows what else.

Mike craned his neck to look back at Max and Lucas on his bike. Max wore her typical scowl while punching Lucas every time he started

singing again, earning amused grins from Will and Dustin who rode on either side of them.

The game was started by Will (who always seemed to memorize song lyrics better than anyone Mike knew) His cheeks were sore from smiling so much, but it was oh so worth it to annoy the poor redhead all day.

El's eyes were also trained on the pair, a flurry of curls hiding her face, and a hand balancing the boombox in her lap Will had asked her to carry during the ride, and the other holding onto Mike's waist (god, he hadn't realized how much he had missed that). When she turned back, her eyebrows scrunched together in a mix of confusion and embarrassment on behalf of the others.

Mike smirked.

Cute

With a flutter of heartbeats, their eyes met briefly, her face disappeared a shy duck of her head, with Mike doing the same, refocusing his attention to the road ahead.

El stared down at the weird machine that reminded her of one of Jim's radios while listening to the singing of the boys. She felt a strange stirring of regret that caught her off guard, like she should know the words by heart, along with the references to all the movies seen by everyone around her, just like everything else about the world she should just know. These thoughts always seemed to catch her in these moments, weakened by any moment where she feels somewhat normal, reminding her just how different she is.

"You gotta go easy on yourself." El repeated Jim's words in her head. With a sigh, she let her head drop into Mike's back, relishing in the warmth that bounced off his t-shirt, and adjusting her free arm around his waist.

She didn't notice, but Mike had froze, peering around at her with surprised eyes, before relaxing and smiling to himself.

To everyone's delight, the silhouette of the cliff side peeked over the trees in the distance, shrouded in a blue haze. The midday sun

relentlessly blasted everyone's skin in waves of smoldering heat, leaving everyone covered in a thin sheen of sweat and yearning for the chill waters of the quarry.

The sand felt hot beneath everyone's feet once their shoes came off, almost burning. They had scurried over to the nearest shade beneath a handful of trees that crept near the water's edge.

They could hear the frogs chirping somewhere nearby, with the occasional glimpse of a dragonfly darting in and out of sight

The sunlight danced across ripples of turquoise water that turned green beneath the cast of the trees. The light touched the tops of towering cliffs, turning grey to gold, and lit up the green vegetation that dotted the cliff side and covered the top in an expanse of forests. The whole thing left a good portion of the water shrouded in its shadow.

Mike could still recall the way the wind seemed to tear through his body while plummeting through the air, the shock when he started to slow down, until what felt like the air hardened around him, pressing into him from all sides.

He smiled and shook his head at the image of Troy and James bolting, for once in a long time, they were the ones who were afraid.

How such a feeble looking girl could be capable of so much strength, he'll never know..

They had settled on a small ledge, not that high above the water, but high enough that Mike felt anxious about jumping even though there were numerous times he and the boys had gone swimming here when they were younger.

When life was simpler.

Mike heard shuffling from behind him as the others went about setting down their things and preparing for the water. He knew he shouldn't look, but his eyes found themselves searching ahead for the clearing up against the shore line. He could still hear the sirens screaming through the still night air. One thought out of hundreds

clashing in his head was—

“Oh my god, that’s his body, it really is.”

Funny enough how the first actual corpses he would ever see would fall to the school floor mere days later. That was his first real introduction into what it was like to lose someone he tried to hold on to with everything he had.

Now he knew that was his ultimate fear. It was something he thought about more often than he’d like, something shitty would happen like it always did and he’d go through hours of anxiously waiting, hoping, but preparing himself for the worse.

That part itself wasn’t what he was most afraid of, it was waiting for them to return that scared him. Waiting for them to come back to from the dead to save the day and resume what parts of their lives they can.

Only, they don’t return, instead he’s left to wait for them, every day of his life while everyone else moves on.

Mike’s eyes sought out El. Sometimes he needed to see her in front of him, or hear her voice through the supercom, just to remind himself she was real, not just a ghost he’s been chasing within the cotton walls of the fort. Whenever he could reach out to her, it would feel like he was given a second chance.

She, along with Lucas and Dustin were staring at the same spot while Will fiddled with his brothers boom box, seemingly unaware- Mike couldn’t remember whether or not anyone ever told him this was the spot they found the fake body, or if he did and Will simply had too many things going on to remember. Mike made up his mind up mind to never tell him, better to be blissfully unaware rather than finding even more reminders in every corner.

Lucas, Dustin and El must of noticed the look on each others faces, because they shared somber glances between themselves and Mike, looking almost relieved. After all, they went through some version of

the same hell.

“Last one in is a piece of school spaghetti!”

Max sprinted, clothes peeled off to reveal a black and red one piece, launching herself off the ledge with an excited yelp. The serene stillness of the water erupted with a loud splash as Max disappeared beneath the surface, her head popped up after a few moments later while her hand beckoned to the others.

“C’mon! What’re you sissies waiting for?! The water’s amazing!”

This seemed to break the spell, with everyone scrambling to remove their outerwear, with Will happily jumping in after Max, having already set his stuff down.

“Hey no fair!”

“Cheater!”

“You’re supposed to wait till we’re ready!”

El wound up being the last to enter the water, watching as one by one, everyone dived into the water amidst the others’ cheers. She stood at the edge, fiddling with the rubbery material of her swimsuit stretched across her stomach. It was a gift Max had surprised her with. El almost felt guilty when she told her it was an old birthday present from back in California, she knew from the small party Hopper had set up for to celebrate her first real birthday that those kinds of presents were meant to be special. When she voiced this Max simply laughed, “Nah, it’s from my step dad. It’s not really my style.” She said while eying the navy blue fabric that was dotted with small, white flowers with disdain.

El still found it hard to trust her like she did with the others, she didn’t really know how much trust is healthy, but the more she spoke to her, the more she regretted pushing her away.

Up until now, El was bubbling with excitement to leave the confines of the cabin to go here with them, being able to talk face to face instead of through a radio.

She had gone with them to town before, to a place with a huge rotating sign that spelled out “arcade” in glowing letters. How she ever got lucky enough for Hopper to let her go, she’ll never know, though he insisted on sitting outside in his cruiser, the safety of his pistol switched off and radio set to the same channel as everyone’s supercoms.

It was dark with bright neon lights mixed in with the screens of games propped up in a rows upon rows. She quickly discovered them to be harder than they look. Once she got the hang the of it, it gave her a safe kind of thrill, her racing heart drowned out by excited cheers rather than terrified screams. But she was also surrounded by people, and with people came paranoia. She thought Jim’s fear wouldn’t spread to her, yet even as she played she kept thinking that if the wrong person saw her, if somehow someone from the lab recognised her, then it would all be over.

So the isolation of the quarry was appealing to her, a way to forget her past and just be normal kid.

That excitement faded as soon as she thought about being submerged in the water. Feelings of suffocation and claustrophobia creeped up on her, painfully tightening her chest, making her hands clench when she closed her eyes, only seeing that thing rising high above her, it’s cry ringing in her ears, glazed over eyes framed by decaying skin coated in membranes with that thing worming it way out her mouth and....

“Hey El!”

Her attention snapped to the water.

“You comin in or what?!” It was Will who was calling her. All eyes were now on her, it felt like they were expecting something of her.

She tried to speak, but no words came out, speech eluding her like it always did when touched by nervousness.

Everyone’s faces were painted with concern. Why worried? She’s fine, she can, she knows she’s fine.

After eternity, she managed to steady herself and meekly said, “Can’t swim”.

“Oh shit, sorry El, I forgot.” Mike shouted, like it was somehow his fault (she wished he’d stop with that) as he made his way to the quarry shoreline.

This answer seemed to satisfy everyone, though El could see Dustin and Lucas whispering to each other with frowns all the way from where she stood.

Once Mike was knee deep in the water, he beckoned her down to meet him with the idea to help her, though El could see through to his real goal of easing her up the water so she wouldn’t be left out, but she agreed anyway.

She found that once her feet cautiously slipped into the water, with a hand clasped with Mike’s for balance across the mix of mud, rocks and clay, that the dull pain in her chest started to unravel with the slowing beat of her pulse.

She still wasn’t completely okay, but she could enjoy the the coolness of the water against her skin, relieving her from the harsh heat of the sun. It didn’t have the salty sent she had grown to hate, she wasn’t trapped here. She ran her free hand through the water, watching the sunlight break into large ripples beneath her touch. Dozens of animals the size of her finger swiftly darted away from the pair just under surface (Jim had called them fish when the came across a stream during one of their walks). Mike’s hand still held onto hers, a constant presence that helped her to steady herself.

It occurred to her this may have been the first time she went into a body of water since the makeshift bath in the gym (that was when she decided it would be her last time). There were numerous times she had knelt down by a stream or river, trying her best to ignore the icy chill that stung her fingers while she splashed handfuls over herself, trying to wash off the layers of sweat and dirt that stuck to her skin without getting her clothes. After awhile. She stopped doing it only when necessary when her memories started ambushing her with flashes of being safely hidden in the bathroom. Counting the faint spots dotting Mike’s pale skin (there must be word for them)

while he gently wiped the grime off and blood of her face with the warm, damp cloth. She'd think about how her chest and belly seemed to lighten and warm up at the same time when he told her he was happy she was home, happy she was there with him, until she'd realize there were tears staining her cheeks. If she ever dared go further than that then she couldn't remember.

Seeing her relax a bit, Mike hesitantly asked "Do you wanna try swimming?"

"No" El answered firmly. Every time she had ever been submerged, something bad happened that left her the kind of fear that made her feel like she was about to burst and have the life drained out of her, the kind that made her want to cease feeling entirely. The memories of those emotions were ingrained into her mind and body. She knew the moment her head went under, her body would panic and she would lose control. She'd let the water get up to her waist, and that's it.

Mike made no attempts to argue, instead staying beside her. After a bit, the others drifted towards them, with only Max occasionally nearing the deeper parts of the quarry, gliding through the water with minimal effort that sort of fascinated El.

Dustin had suggested they play something he called Marco Polo, where a member declared as "it" would keep their eyes closed, calling out "Marco", and everyone would answer "Polo", carefully dodging "it" when they tried to follow their voices.

It was a struggle for everyone but El who didn't need her eyes to know where everyone was, and to her delight, quickly discovered that she could launch her body through the water with a mental push. A few times the water reached up to her chin, but she found her fears were pushed too far in the background for her to care.

She couldn't help but smile when no one seemed to catch on to her, well, except for Will, who made his way to her side and and whispered in her ear, "You're cheating, aren't you?". El gave him her best innocent face and said "Is it a rule?". Will had laughed and said "Good point".

It wasn't long before they all were perched on the bank up against the shore, gathered around Dustin who muttered out loud whilst rummaging through his book bag, grumbling over the The Clash blasting from the boombox, "I told you knuckle heads to bring snacks, didn't I?" Of course nobody ever listens to me!"

Mike rolled his eyes, but cringed internally when his stomach growled out loud.

"You're wearing sunscreen, right?"

"What?" Mike scrunched his face at Lucas

"I said....Are. You. Wearing. Sunscreen?" Lucas said, slowly pronouncing each word.

Max, who sat beside him, gave him a weird look while Will and Dustin exchanged knowing smiles.

"Yeah....." Mike muttered, looking down.

"Good" Lucas said, eyes lighting up "Cause last time you didn't you looked like a tomato that got slapped."

"What?" Max asked with an even more confused, but slightly humored face.

Dustin raised his hand towards Mike and almost shouted while trying to hold back laughter "Mike literally fell asleep one time and when he woke up he looked he was sunbathing in hell! Oh, and he also had a handprint on his stomach from where he was resting his hand."

"Seriously?" Max snorted, she looked back at Mike with a teasing grin and said "Well, I can't say I'm too surprised."

"I fell asleep!" Mike shouted.

"Yeah, in the Red Sea." Will responded whilst fiddling with a tape.

"The Red Sea isn't actually red." Dustin corrected.

"Really, I had no idea?!" Will said sarcastically.

"Oh, by the way." Will quickly added.

"Hey, Max" Will was now looking at her with an impish grin, and Max's eyebrows shot up, already knowing what's coming.

With a press of a button, a familiar tune rang through the air, and Max groaned and threw her hands to her head as if to nurture a headache while all the boys perked up started humming along.

“Da na na na na
da na na na
da na na na na na”

Is there something strange
In your neighborhood?”

“I seriously hate you guys....”

Mike glanced to his side, doing a double take with his voice trailing off when his eyes landed on an empty sand where El sat just moments before.

He swiveled around, growing more alarmed when he couldn't find her. “Hey guys?” His shout was drowned out the blaring music and voices singing along to it. Mike looked farther up ahead when he caught a flash of blue. The tension he didn't realize he was holding melted when he recognized her form climbing over the rocks at the base of the small ledge he and the others had jumped from. So much tension left him that he laughed a little to himself.

El didn't realize how far she had wandered away from the group until the uproar of music and voices caused her to look back to them, she was sort of pleased when they didn't seem to notice her walking away. El had felt like she needed a few quiet moments away from the loud shouts and music.

El strained her neck up, watching with fascination as a particularly large cloud slowly traveled beneath the sun, hiding it almost entirely in a bright white haze, covering the whole quarry in a blanket of cool shadow, before the cloud moved on, lighting everything back up with golden hues and returning the sun's warmth.

El was always fascinated by sunlight. How it brought up vibrant colors, such as hues of warm orange into her hair, breathing life into everything it touched, and the way it touched her skin with warmth. It was mesmerizing compared to the the long beams of bright white

light that tinted the walls of the lab in cold, almost deathly tones. The first time El saw a sunrise, she was astonished. She could still remember sitting on a fallen tree, mouth gaping open while the sky erupted into fiery hues of red, orange, and yellow, with clouds tinged with purple, pink and blue streaking across the sky.

El felt a sharp pain her toe, snapping her from her thoughts. She hissed and knelt down to the rock she stubbed her toe on. There was a tiny scrape on her big toe barely bigger than her finger tip, but it still hurt like hell (she's not sure what hell is, Jim compares it just about everything, which frustrates her).

El looked up to see the ledge, beneath it were dozens of large rocks poking just above the water at the base of it. Unsure of her purpose, she walked over. She relished the coolness of the ground beneath her feet, running hand over the dark brown stone. The ledge towered above her head, making her feel hidden to the rest of the world, which she liked. She hated being out in the open,

She spied the rocks poking out of the water and started climbing atop them. Movement on the water caught her eye, so balancing on her heels, she carefully leaned forward just enough to see a small group insects hovering above the water, seeking shelter from the sun. As her gaze sharpened, she noticed some fish a few inches long with faint stripes covering their sides slowly circling beneath the insects, nearly camouflaged in the hazy green water if not for their stalking the insects flying above them.

El smiled to herself, Dustin was always talking to her about these kinds of stuff, she wondered what he would call these fish.

Mike kept glancing her way out of curiosity as she hovered above the water, praying his friends wouldn't notice. The song everyone was singing along too faded to the background in Mike's mind when she tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned forward, a small smile growing while watching something in the water. It's stupid, but he couldn't help but find it endearing.

El refocused her eyes back to the insects, and caught sight of her own face. Frowning, she peered closer at the familiar, yet foreign girl staring back at her. Her hair had grown quite a bit over time,

brushing against her shoulders. She wished it would grow faster, though. She wanted to let it become as long as possible for the sake of control (maybe the longer her hair, the less recognizable she'd become?)

She allowed herself to lock eyes with her reflection. There was something haunting in her eyes, that even made herself uncomfortable. She's read a phrase in a book saying something about how eyes are supposed to be a window, she suspected her eyes are a window to the lab, no amount of forgetting would ever change that.

"What is she doing?" Mike thought to himself when she leaned over even further, reaching a hand out to touch the water.

"I ain't afraid of no ghost
I ain't afraid of no ghost"

"Who you gonna call?"

"Ghostbusters!"

El touched her hand to her reflection in the water, distorting her image.

"If you're all alone"

"Pick up the phone and call!"

A clump of earth she mistook for solid rock crumbled beneath her hand. Her mind screamed to do something, to grab hold of any and everything she she could, but all her hands could teach was thin air, all her senses filled with the sensation of crashing in into the water, becoming engulfed by the liquid that filled all her senses and thoughts in a blind panic.

Mike jolted up, mind struggling to register what just happened. He stared at the spot where she fell, watching the violent splash of the water settle back into a smooth, still surface. For one painful, eternity, he waited for her head to reappear, but saw little movement.

He didn't know what to do, his body standing completely paralyzed.

“What wrong?” He recognized the voice to be Will’s.

This somehow snapped him out of his trance, sending a flurry of thoughts racing through his mind.

The water’s too deep
There’s too many rocks where she fell
El can’t swim
Fuck
Fuck
Fuck

He bolted, wind blurring the startled shouts of the others in his ears, barely feeling the sticks and rocks scraping against his bare feet as his long, skinny legs seemed to move by themselves.

Slowing down just enough to hold his breath, he leaped in.

The near silence of the water made the drumming of his pulse deafening, he swiveled his head around faster to let the movements of the water muffle the sound while he frantically looked around.

There were clouds of disturbed silt and dirt, muddying his vision. The boulders jutting up from the floor casted dark, almost black shadows. He followed the cloud, hoping it would lead him to El. The floor sloped sharply into deeper waters, where the the clouds were thickest.

Mike swam as fast as he could, ignoring the sharp pain in his side and the growing heaviness in his limbs. His panic grew with the pressure growing in his lungs, threatening to burst, with him struggling to fight the instinct to start swimming up.

He nearly gasped when he saw the familiar bright blue of her swimsuit, threatening to let the water into his mouth. With one last burst of energy, he lunged forward, but froze in his tracks when he got closer.

There was an eerie calmness to her as she sat on the floor, head down. Instead of floating around her, her hair clung to her head and neck, with beads of water dripping down her skin, like she had just

gotten out of the water. The light bounced off the area surrounding, reflecting her surroundings the same way a floating cloud of diamonds would.

What the hell.....

Head swirling with confusion, Mike reached forward. His hand landed on something solid even though his eyes saw nothing, like an invisible wall made of concrete separated him from El. She jerked her head up, meeting his eyes.

His body was suddenly pulled forward. He collapsed on solid ground, arms shaking while he desperately gasped for air. It felt like the life was drained out him, turning his body to stone. He slowly lifted himself up to see El's face. Her eyes were darkened and, piercing straight through him, with a thin line blood trickling down from one side of her nose, and with a smaller line barely starting in the other, but she was breathing and looking at him.

"You okay?" Mike said, surprised by how winded he sounded.

El just barely nodded her head, which was enough for him. He sat up, staring at the way the water hovered above them in a sphere.

"How?- I can't...I mean....." he tried to turn his awe and bewilderment into sentences. He gave up and settled on "wow...."

He looked back at her and saw her smiling at him, all features softening at once. To his concern, even in the dim light of the water, he could see tiny veins sprouting from beneath her eyes, and there was blood coming out her ears.

"You sure you're okay?" He scooted closer, pushing some wet strands of hair out the way to reveal pale bruises forming on her cheeks and forehead.

"Promise." She quietly whispered. She lifted her arm to wipe away the blood from her nose, leaving the skin above her lip a pink hue, making Mike chuckle. El saw this and scowled, which made Mike smile wider because oh if this isn't too cute, but her scowl melted back to a smile.

Down here, she looked ethereal, like a naiad. Casted in the dim light filtering through the water, creating silver ripples of light and shadow that danced across her skin while the water bent to her will. How Mike ever got lucky enough have her in his life, he'll never know.

He realized he was subconsciously inching closer, or maybe she was pulling him to her. Her lips parted just a touch, catching his eyes, heart beating faster.

Should he?

He shouldn't

But she said she was okay

Will they even get another chance to be alone together?

Would she annoyed?

He really shouldn't

Screw it

He tentatively brought his face closer, hoping to give her enough time to back out. He was surprised when he felt her lips press into his. It was only a few seconds, but it felt slower than usual, without any innocent nerves or fear of being caught hastening them. It startled him, feeling something like electricity pass between. He experimentally sucked on her bottom lip, he heard her make a surprised noise that made butterflies go off in his stomach, before she did the same.

He decided he could hide down here with El all day, and he still wouldn't get tired of this.

God, he was so nervous he felt beads of sweat forming on his back—wait. Sweat? No, that's water, huge drops of it splashing down on them. El tore away from him, eyes wide and jerking her head up. Before Mike realized what was happening, what felt like an entire wave crashed onto him, lifting him up. He could faintly register seeing El in front of him with a panic stricken look on her face. He grabbed her arm and frantically kicked his legs, with El trying her best to mirror him.

They broke the the surface in violent coughing fits, Mike thought he was actually going to puke from the water that found its way inside

his throat.

Once the nausea cleared, the prevailing thought was-

Wow, you're a dumbass

"Holy shit, are you guys okay?!" Mike spun around to see everyone standing in the water, watching them with a mixture of relief and worry.

"Yeah, we're good." Mike said, rubbing water out his eyes. Silently cursing himself, he turned to El and asked "You good?"

She looked shaken, panting and still clinging to his arm, in the sunlight he could see the spidery red veins forming beneath the surface of her skin more clearly.

"Yes" she breathed, so low he almost didn't hear.

"I was about to go in after your asses." He heard Max shout.

He believed them, they were all thigh deep in the water, Dustin and Lucas were both still clutching onto bags of chips.

Mike and El trudged back out the water, drained, El's kept swaying, almost tripping a few times, so Mike put a hand on her upper back to help steady her.

"Oh, by the way." Mike shouted loud enough to get the others attention. With a grin he said "You would not believe what El did this time.

Author's Note:

It's way too long since I last posted, eh? Sorry about that.

Omfg, self promo?!

But yeah, I do have art accounts on Instagram, art/drawing amino, and Stranger Things amino under the name Kenya Illian Art. I've made some ST fanarts

if yah interested.